

## **WEEK 8**

### **CONTINUING AS A CHRISTIAN**

#### **BEFORE THE TALK**

*Welcome the course participants and suggest they take 20 minutes to work through the Study Guide section called **GROUP DISCUSSION 1** with their group.*

#### **THE TALK**

*Deliver the talk. The wording below is intended only as a general guide. The aim of the talk is to warn that Christians will face opposition from the world around them, from their own sinful nature, and also from the devil. The talk explains how to continue as a Christian despite this opposition.*

The movie *Saving Private Ryan*, set during World War II, tells the story of a group of men who are given orders to rescue one single man from behind enemy lines in Normandy. We are told that his three brothers have all recently been killed in action, leaving him as the only child of a single mother. When the US Army Chief of Staff hears about the situation, he gives orders to protect this precious remaining son, Private James Ryan, and he sends out a team of soldiers to bring him back alive.

The rescue mission is extremely perilous, and one by one it claims the soldier's lives. At one point their captain says, "This Ryan better be worth it. He'd better go home, cure some disease or invent the longer-lasting light bulb."

But the orders to rescue Ryan are obeyed, and in the final battle scene, set on a heavily-shelled bridge, as the Captain himself dies, he whispers his last words to a dumbstruck Private Ryan: "James – earn this – earn it."

Fifty years pass and, in the closing shots of the movie, we see an elderly James Ryan returning to Normandy with his wife, children and grandchildren. He kneels beside the grave of the captain and, as tears fill his eyes, he says, "My family is with me today. Every day I think about what you said to me that day on the bridge. I've tried to live my life the best I could. I hope that was enough. I hope that at least in your eyes I've earned what all of you have done for me." Then he turns to his wife and asks with some anxiety, "Tell me I've led a good life. Tell me I'm a good man ..."

In a way, the last words of the captain – "Earn it" – have crippled Ryan. Could he ever live up to the deaths of those young men? Private Ryan has lived his entire life with the last words of his rescuer ringing in his ears.

But Jesus' last words – recorded in John's Gospel chapter 19, verse 30 – are very different. As he dies to rescue us, Jesus doesn't say "Earn it." He says: "It is finished." They, too, are words that have the power to affect the course of a life.

As Jesus died on the cross to rescue you and me from sin, judgement and hell, he uttered those staggering words: “It is finished.” The word in the Greek is actually a single word, “*tetelesti*.” It is in the past tense and it means “it is complete.” This is the word a builder might shout when he places the final slate on the roof of a house he has built. Or the word a couple might use when they finally pay off their twenty-five year mortgage. *Tetelesti* – it is finished.

And notice that it’s not “I am finished,” as if this was a last desperate, self-pitying cry of surrender, a concession of defeat or failure. No, it’s an exclamation of completion, of achievement, of triumph – “It is finished.”

So, as he dies to rescue me, Jesus doesn’t say, “Earn this Rico, earn it.” No, he says, “Rico, it is finished. Your sin – past, present and future – is all forgiven.” It is finished. I can’t earn it, I can’t pay for it, I’ve done nothing to deserve it. But Christ died for me to pay for my sin, to bring me back into a relationship with my loving Creator.

But this wonderful relationship won’t be plain sailing. Christians will face opposition: from the world around them, from their own sinful nature, and also from the devil, who wants to undermine the Christian’s relationship with God.

So firstly, there will be opposition from the world. If you stand up for Christ’s words, if you remind people that they are living in God’s world, that they’re accountable to him, there will be times when you will be frozen out by people – even by those you love. It can be a painful experience to find yourself politely ignored or even verbally attacked by those closest to you. Jesus himself found that those who thought they knew him best – those he’d grown up with – resented the claims he made, and were offended by him. So if people are offended by us, it’s a great comfort to know that things were no different for Jesus. In John 15, verses 18 onwards, Jesus warns us very clearly about this: “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first ... If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.”

Second, all Christians will face opposition from their own sinful nature. As Paul says in Romans 7, verses 18 and 19: “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing.” And if that is true for Paul, who is one of the most godly Christians who ever lived, then it will certainly be true for us.

And third, there’s opposition from the devil. What do you think about the devil? For lots of people, he’s a joke figure: the man in the red tights with the unconvincing horns and the plastic pitchfork. He’s not a threat; he’s a joke.

The passage we read earlier in our GROUP DISCUSSION mentioned him, and this may be a shock to you, but the Bible insists that there *are* evil powers at work who will try to make you doubt the truth, who will lie to you and tempt you. The Bible explains that there are powerful, complex and, above all, intelligent forces that are out to undermine the Christian and anyone who is even thinking of becoming one.

Jesus teaches that the devil's opposition is serious: even when people are listening to God's word being taught, he is at work. The last thing he wants is for people to put their trust in Christ and be saved. Jesus points this out in Luke chapter 8, verse 12, making it plain that people can hear God's words but then find that: "the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved."

Christians are involved in an unseen spiritual battle. Please turn with me to Ephesians chapter 6, and we'll read verses 10–12.

*Read aloud Ephesians 6:10–12.*

How does the devil fight? He schemes. He fights subtly, with no moral principles, no code of ethics.

Jesus calls him the "father of lies." He's always trying to put lies into people's heads – things like, "Look, God's invisible. He's invisible because he's not there! This isn't the real world. This isn't reality. Forget about it."

Another name for the devil in the Bible is "the accuser." And it's a very appropriate title, because he's always pointing to your failures. "If you were a real Christian, you would stop sinning. How can you call yourself a Christian when you keep doing this or that?" Or, "Remember that terrible thing you did. There's no way you can become a Christian."

And when you hear things like that, it's absolutely vital to remember those last words of Jesus: "It is finished." That's why Jesus came – *because* we're sinners. Once you've put your trust in Christ, it's finished.

Now, having said all that, let me say that to blame the devil for every single mishap, inconvenience or unpleasantness is unwise. It is dangerous to underestimate the devil's power, but it can be equally damaging to overestimate it. The Bible says that – thanks to the cross – the devil has already been defeated. As Revelation chapter 12 explains, "he knows that his time is short."

In the face of opposition from the world, from the sinful nature and from the devil, there are three great assurances that help Christians.

*Display the following headings and read them aloud.*

The witness of the Spirit  
The word of the Father  
The cross of Christ

## THE WITNESS OF THE SPIRIT

As we saw on the weekend / day away, the Holy Spirit gives believers the strength and the desire to battle against their sinful nature. In fact, this feeling of inner conflict – between the Spirit and the sinful nature – is strangely comforting, because it confirms that the Spirit is real and at work.

The Spirit also assures the Christian that he or she is indeed one of “God’s children,” no longer separated from him, and destined to be with him in heaven. For Christians in the midst of opposition, that assurance of eternal life is a very precious thing indeed.

## THE WORD OF THE FATHER

Christians can also be sure of their relationship with God because of his promises to them in the Bible.

C. S. Lewis’s book *The Screwtape Letters* contains imaginary letters written by a senior devil to a junior devil. The senior devil wants to teach the junior devil how to cause a man who has become a Christian to waver in his faith. And the first tactic he recommends is to make the man rely totally on his feelings. Now, don’t get me wrong, our emotions are God-given – they’re part of what it is to be human. But if they’re all we have to go on, then we will start to doubt our faith.

No matter what we feel – and as all of us know, our feelings can change with the weather – there are certain things we can be sure of. In times of anxiety, indecision, loneliness or temptation, we must remind ourselves of those certainties by reading and trusting the words of the infinitely powerful, infinitely loving God.

Let me read you two of God’s promises in the Bible:

*Read aloud Hebrews 13:5 (from “God has said ...”) and John 5:24.*

Reality is not determined by what we feel. It is determined by God’s promises, which tell me that I am a Christian, that I am forgiven and that I am going to heaven because of what Christ has done. God has given me his word about these things.

Time and again, when clergy visit people who are dying, they find that people often feel very guilty about a particular thing they’ve done in their lives. You can ask the person, “Are you sorry? Have you asked God’s forgiveness? Have you asked the wronged person’s forgiveness?” And they will often answer “yes” to all three questions. But they still felt desperately guilty.

It’s at moments like these – when guilty feelings persist – that Christians need to trust the word of God. Look at 1 John chapter 1, verses 8–9:

*Read aloud 1 John 1:8–9.*

So if you're feeling guilty about something, even though you've already asked God for forgiveness, let me ask you this: "Do you think your sin is covered by the words 'all unrighteousness'?" If so, do you trust God's promise here? God is promising that he will forgive all your sins – past, present and future. No matter what you've done, you are forgiven. You don't have to feel guilty anymore.

## **THE CROSS OF CHRIST**

The third assurance of a Christian's relationship with God is the cross of Christ. As we've seen, Jesus doesn't tell us to "Earn it." He died saying, "It is finished." You're in a relationship with God not because you deserve it, not because you've earned it or because you've done enough or been good enough, but because you've trusted in what Christ has already done for you. You're at peace with God and you're going to heaven.

As the apostle Paul says at the beginning of Romans chapter 8: "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

## **AT THE END OF THE TALK**

Let me leave you with the following questions for your groups:

*Display the following questions and read them aloud.*

- Do you feel able to trust God's promises in the Bible?
- Can you see how Jesus' words – "It is finished" – might affect your life?

*Allow 30 minutes for groups to work together through the Study Guide section called **GROUP DISCUSSION 2**.*

## **AT THE END OF THE DISCUSSION**

Before next week, it would be a great help if you'd do the **HOME STUDY** section in your *Study Guide*.